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Opening extract from

A Ravelled Flag

Written by

Julia Jones

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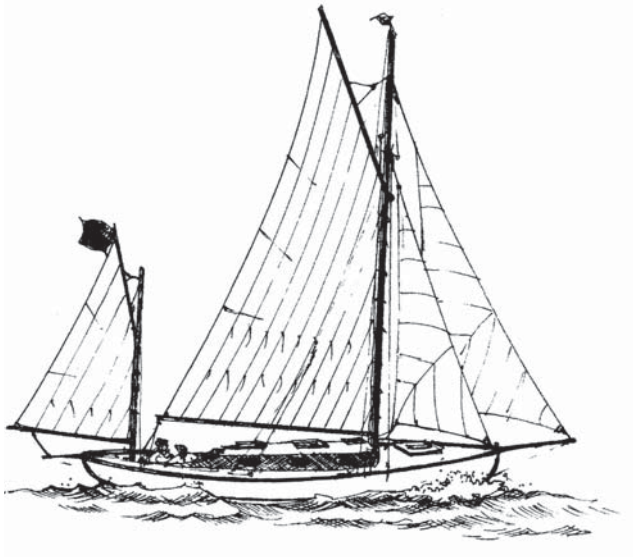
A Ravelled Flag

Julia Jones

VOLUME TWO
OF THE *Strong Winds* TRILOGY



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This book is dedicated to Francis and to Frank
with gratitude for all their good advice – whether I took it or not.

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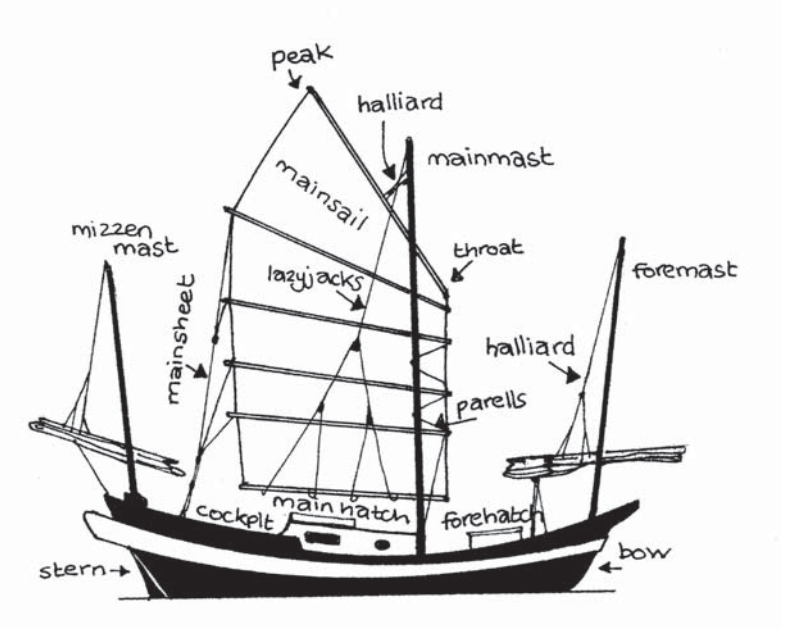
Donny's map of the Shotley Peninsula

Donny's chart of the Suffolk coast



***Strong Winds* – rigging diagram**

CHAPTER ONE

Ship Wreck

Tuesday 26 September 2006, morning

Donny woke slowly and luxuriously that first morning on board *Strong Winds*.

He felt the fragments of a dream evaporating from his head. He was waving from a boat to an island. And his friends were waving back. No, not waving. They had been signalling. With flags. Somewhere else in the dream he sensed two children, outcasts on a deserted shore, sharing their last few crumbs.

Donny shook the dream away. This was the first day of his new life. He didn't need distraction.

When he'd woken yesterday he'd found himself lying on the hard deck of a schooner, soaked by fog. It had been his fourteenth birthday but he'd been alone and frightened.

He shifted one shoulder experimentally against the softness of his bunk. Yes, it ached. And so did the other. The palms of both hands felt chafed but not blistered any more. The salty water was definitely toughening him up.

So good to be here. To be together again. To be safe.

He let himself re-live the moment – also yesterday – when he had first seen this boat, *Strong Winds*, scudding in from the open sea with the afternoon sun glowing golden in her sails. Bringing Great Aunt Ellen home.

It was his second best birthday present ever.

Getting his mum back had been the best.

Donny rolled over, ignoring his aches, and peered across the cabin at Skye's sleeping heap. Her long dark hair was un-plaited and tangled across her face so he couldn't really see her properly. It looked dank and greasy as if it hadn't been washed all the time she'd been away. There were no bright ribbons twisted in its strands and the bits of her skin that he could see were as dull as unworked clay. Her mouth was open and she was snoring slightly.

She was there. The person who mattered most in the world.

Last time he'd seen her had been in the dim light of a hospital ward. She had been sedated. The time before that, she had been screaming.

It was over.

Push it deep down into the nightmare bag and pull the choke-strings shut.

Donny stretched his legs out with a sigh of pleasure and lay on his back watching the pale sun as it danced across the cabin roof. It was almost worth having a few aches and pains. They sort of spiced-up the comfort.

He hadn't felt anything so good for … months? There was a fleecy blanket underneath him, so thick it must be doubled; an unzipped sleeping bag light and warm on top; and a blissfully soft cotton pillow smoothed beneath his head.

Skye had the same. Gold Dragon must have put them there. That's what she liked to be called, his new great-aunt.

She was a small woman, more than eighty years old, with a hook instead of one hand. She had spent yesterday and most of the day before sailing solo across the North Sea from Holland. And she was famous. Polly Lee, pioneer yachtswoman. There

had been a TV camera waiting by the lock gate when she and *Strong Winds* had arrived.

Donny wasn't sure where Gold Dragon slept or what time of the morning this was. He definitely didn't want to disturb her if she might still be asleep. So he carried on lying there, basking, as he watched the flickers of light chasing like minnows across the cabin roof. The air in the cabin felt clean and slightly chilly. There must be a breeze outside, a breeze fresh enough to ruffle even the sheltered waters of the marina.

Donny could hear halliards tapping against masts. He was surrounded by boats. Better than any dream. And the yacht that was moored closest was beautiful *Snow Goose*. His friends, Xanthe and Maggi, and their parents would be sleeping there.

If people were still asleep?

He didn't have a watch so he listened harder, hoping for clues. He caught the cry of a seagull, a passing engine and then, from across the harbour came the round-the-clock rattle of cranes loading and unloading container ships in the Port of Felixstowe.

Donny shifted less comfortably.

Cranes and halliards wouldn't waken Skye. When he'd been younger his granny, who was dead, had sometimes put her hands over his ears so he could feel what it might be like in his mother's silent world. But his head hadn't really been silent at all: it had rumbled and buzzed as if it was a machine on stand-by.

There'd been one bad shock among his birthday surprises, gate-crashing his happiness like a cackling black witch. He'd discovered that Granny hadn't been Skye's mother: that she wasn't, in fact, his granny.

They said that babies in the womb could hear their mother's

voice, muffled and far-away like whale music. Skye had been deaf ever since she'd been born but presumably unborn babies didn't hear in the same way. It was probably more like feeling sounds than hearing them. But if Skye had felt her mother's voice, it hadn't been Granny's.

Granny – Miss Edith Walker, who had looked after Skye and him for all their lives – had been an aunt, a senior aunt. Gold Dragon – Miss Ellen Walker – was the junior one. Skye's birth mother wasn't Edith or Ellen but a middle sister called Eirene. Someone who, until yesterday, no-one had ever mentioned.

Great Aunt Ellen had told him last night that Eirene had 'gone' soon after Skye was born. How could this Eirene have gone away and left her baby – a tiny, deaf, brain-damaged baby who wasn't expected to survive?

Donny looked fondly at his mum as her eyelids flickered in dream-sleep.

Eirene! What sort of a stupid name was that?

The cosy waking-up feeling had gone. Donny urgently needed a pee. There was a toilet block somewhere at the end of the pontoons and a keypad with a serial number that he hadn't managed to remember. He pushed his sleeping bag off and sat up. Glad he was still wearing socks. No time for shoes.

Skye moved restlessly as Donny hurried up the companionway. He couldn't wait. He could see Joshua Ribiero about to get into his car.

Donny ran along the pontoon to catch him. He didn't notice the limited edition electric-blue Mercedes parked strategically overlooking *Strong Winds*.

"Good morning, Donny. We thought that you would never

wake. June has taken the girls to school and your great-aunt has walked to buy groceries. We offered to help but … she's a very independent lady."

"Yeah, right. Er, sorry, what's the code for the toilet block?"

"898132. You reverse the telephone number. And, Donny, please don't linger. It's best for your mother that she's not left alone until she has completely understood where she is. She has been given a large quantity of medication and it'll take some time for her body to readjust. We can expect physical symptoms as well as considerable disorientation. Possibly distress."

"Yeah, sure, I'll be really quick. Er, thanks a lot," said Donny and sped away. Eight nine eight, one three two, eight nine eight, one three two. That seemed about the most urgent information right now.

Joshua hesitated, then left. He had patients waiting.

A blond woman in a Gucci business suit swayed briskly towards *Strong Winds* in her Louboutin shoes. Making bad worse was her special gift. You could call it mal-fare.

Donny punched the numbers into the keypad and heard the automatic lock click free.

It wasn't so easy to exit. Someone else was fumbling with the lock, outside. Didn't seem to understand the combination, wouldn't listen when Donny tried to help. All he could do in the end was stand back and wait until the man, or whoever it was, got fed up trying and went away.

Donny didn't see anyone when he finally got out. He didn't really look because now he could hear shouting.

Something was happening on *Strong Winds*. The junk couldn't be … moving?

Donny ran.

"Mum!" he yelled, as he hurtled down the access ramp.

That was a waste of breath.

Skye was standing on *Strong Winds'* foredeck in her old jersey and her long dark tie-dye skirt. She was pushing against the wooden staging with a boat hook. The junk's mainsail was half unfurled and the mooring lines were loose. There were trailing ropes everywhere.

She was looking towards the lock gates and the wide spaces of the harbour and sort of howling as she shoved the boat fiercely away from the pontoon. The fresh breeze was already catching the top section of the unfurled mainsail, threatening to make the heavy junk unmanageable in this confined space. The next row of expensive moored yachts was only metres distant. Donny knew he must do something quickly if he were to avert a massive collision.

But what?

Snow Goose, the Ribieros' pride and joy, was lying just ahead of *Strong Winds*. Both boats had been moored in the central area of the marina, where there was room to lie alongside instead of having to manoeuvre into narrower, car park-style spaces.

Donny ran to *Snow Goose* and vaulted on board. As he'd hoped, there was a spare coil of mooring line, neatly positioned on the yacht's aft deck, ready attached to her starboard samson post.

"MUM!" he shouted again. And hurled the line straight at her.

His aim was good. The rope snaked out and hit Skye hard on her shoulder and the side of her head. She stopped shoving and

looked to see where it had come from.

Then she saw Donny.

He could use sign language now. "Tie the rope onto something! Quick! Tie the rope on!"

The middle section of the mooring line had fallen in the water but Skye had caught its end. She dropped the boat hook and began to pull, hand over hand, heaving herself desperately back to her child as if this rope was some super-sized umbilical cord.

She was pulling much too strongly. The slack was lifting too quickly out of the water. This could be another disaster. *Strong Winds* hadn't stopped moving backwards. She'd never be able to take the strain once the full weight of the boat came onto the rope. It'd burn the skin off her hands, pull her overboard.

"Tie the rope on!" Donny kept signing. "Wrap it round something!"

He saw her look about, then bend forward and wind the rope round and round one of the solid wooden cleats, which were positioned inside the bulwarks on either side of the junk's high bow.

Not a moment too soon. The curve in the line was straightening. Could slender *Snow Goose* bear *Strong Winds'* full weight?

The rope twanged taut, shaking off drops of water in sparkling curves on either side. Donny felt *Snow Goose* shift under him as she took the strain. She pulled back hard on her own mooring lines. A moment of tension. Ropes and cleats creaked.

Everything held. It was going to be okay. *Strong Winds* stopped slipping backwards. She was several boat-lengths away from *Snow Goose*, momentarily at rest.

Another section of her big mainsail tumbled free.

Donny was trying to work out angles. Should he attempt to winch the junk back to her berth? Would she swing in against the pontoon? The space behind *Snow Goose* was empty and *Strong Winds* had plenty of fenders to minimise the impact. He could be there in seconds and get a rope to her stern. Skye would be there too. They could hold the junk steady; then sort out the mooring lines in safety.

Was that what was going to happen? For a moment Donny hesitated.

Skye was uncertain too. She looked at the rope, then looked at her child, still parted from her by a stretch of rippled water.

Skye wasn't used to water. This separation frightened her. The lies she'd been told were dripping poison through her head. She began again to heave on the rope that linked her boat to his.

"No, Mum, NO! Don't do that!" he signed.

Hurried footsteps on the staging behind him. "Here … son … you look as if you could do with a hand."

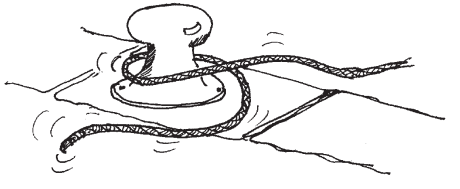
One of the men from the marina office had seen his plight and was running to help.

It was too late. At that moment an unlucky gust caught the top sections of *Strong Winds'* loosened mainsail and set her sailing. The tide-less water offered no resistance and she picked up momentum in a couple of metres. The high strong bow, which yesterday Donny had thought so beautiful, was coming at him like a battering ram.

Straight towards the pointed stern and varnished spars of the elegant *Snow Goose*.

"Pairrfect," murmured the Mal-fairy, selecting one of the stored numbers in her BlackBerry. There had been all that unfortunate

publicity yesterday. This should put the record straight. Or skew it, naicely.

Donny was searching for something, anything, he could use to stave off the impact. He knew his own arms would be too short: his boy's strength not enough. Was there an oar, a boat hook even? He pulled at *Snow Goose's* tiller in the futile hope that it would come free and he could use it to avert disaster.

The tiller was fixed in its position. There was nothing he could do.